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ABSTRACT

Sensitivity training in the classroom can help children cope with and adapt to their environment--family, peer group, friends, school, and teachers--and get them to talk honestly and openly about emotional, social, and intellectual feelings and concepts. Some techniques of encouraging students to explore, to become involved with and aware of themselves and their world may include (1) photographing a familiar person or object and writing about it; (2) experiencing various senses and then describing a pipe cleaner, a rock, a dictionary, a grape; and (3) categorizing the ways in which emotions, body postures, and facial expressions affect communication. (MF)

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Sensitivity Training in the Classroom

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Sensitivity training: an "immoral" fad, or preparation for a richer and more satisfying life? A young teacher in his professional training year suggests some new approaches, which cannot be casually dismissed. Photographs by the editor.

Most teachers would call their jobs "teaching a curriculum to a group of children." Most of society believes this to be adequate, but to my norm of "helping the child to cope with and adapt to his environment" such an approach has numerous weaknesses. Most teachers manipulate both the curriculum and the children, as goals are set and paths with rewards are chosen by the teacher for the child. Is he really then dealing with the child or is he merely working with a cog in his machine?

Let's look at the various aspects of my approach to teaching, and see what I mean by helping the child to cope with his environment. Included are: his environment, his peer group, his family, the community, the television, his friends, the curriculum and school, his own self and yes the thing you, his teacher, are the most responsible for–you.

Do you know how you fit into the child's environment? Have you ever heard what he thinks and feels about you? If he is afraid of you, he will tell you all the things you want to hear, and you may really never know. Do you try to get to the depths of how a child really *feels?*

I do not want to teach to kids, but I do want them to learn. There is a big difference. In order to understand the kids I worked with, I had to gather data. I had to get them to talk honestly, openly and freely about their emotional, social and intellectual feelings and concepts.

To do this I used the medium of photography. I chose this because I felt that the uniqueness of the medium would facilitate more answers than the conventional stereotypes expressed in language. Each child could become involved in finding his own picture by using something I called a *framer.* The framer is a one foot square piece of black plastic with a three inch square hole cut in the middle. The child could use this to the final picture as he sighted his subject with one eye through the framer, which he held at arm's length.

We talked about taking pictures and how these might convey messages and ideas without words. The students were then asked to shoot a picture that would tell me something about their feelings about themselves. Each child then went through the school or onto the school grounds and shot one picture.

One child, considered to be a slow learner by himself and the others in his class, took a picture of a chalk line on a black board and wrote the following comment:

> a line on a black board
> I belong there but
> I'm not the same
> I stand out.

What did he mean? I analyzed it this way: chalk is to be put on a blackboard, but it is not the blackboard, and by very black-white contrast it stands out. Could it be possible that he was talking about how he felt he fitted into the classroom? I talked to him about this afterward, and he said, "Gee you know, well, I'm a person" (he put his hand on his chest and sat up straight). "But the guys make me feel bad all the time. I know I'm not as good as them, but gee, I do try to do well."

What can one do to help children like this? At least I took the first step: I became aware of the problem. It was meaningful for both of us–child and teacher–for him to be able to relate the situation as he saw it.

Let's look at some of the other children's comments and realize how photography helps them to reveal how perceptive and aware they really are:

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I took a picture of a cow skull
At the time I felt dull and lifeless.
Now when I look at the picture it depends on what
moods I'm in to make it look appropriate.

I took a picture of a fire extinguisher.
I took it because it was bright and shiny.
I think I am bright and shiny . . . it is
standing all alone by a pipe. It hasn't been used
since it has been put there.

I took a picture of a peace symbol made
with two fingers . . .
If people had enough of them people may not
kill other people.

I took the picture of the bottom of a drinking
fountain. I took the picture because it is confusing
and I am usually confused. The tubes are hollow,
and sometimes I feel hollow.

I took a picture of a brick wall outside.
. . . because I feel alone sometimes, even when I
am surrounded by people. I don't know why, but I do!

I took a picture of dark stairs with a mysterious
hose leading off to some adventure . . .
but deep inside it sorta says 'What in the world is
life coming to'.

I took a picture of the sun breaking through the clouds, its supposed to represent indecision. The white part represents happiness; the grey, a bad mood; the black, madness and hate overcoming the happiness. I suppose it means I'm a mixed personality-person. It means that although the dark is overpowering and the grey swift to overcome, the happiness can and will break through and even better just may come over the edge of that cloud and break out over everything.

Perhaps the most interesting and yet disturbing comments from the children were those that suggested that they had never been exposed in school to the techniques I was using or the concepts involved.

One concept I worked with as motivation for the photography unit was basic communication. Realizing that body postures, actions, and facial expressions are often very significant cues to understanding, I worked with categorizing these. The children were fascinated. I think they discovered that instead of being afraid of an angry face, they could understand that this was a communication. I suggested that, if people become open and aware of these emotions, we will better understand ourselves as functioning entities.

After categorizing such emotions as loneliness, happiness, sadness, anger, and fear we decided that poetry could serve as a vehicle for sharing these feelings with others. I read and displayed several poems by Rod McKuen, who uses free-flowing emotion and an open style. I tried to get the children to look inward at themselves for the content of their poetry, rather than copy the style of famous poets. I had everyone close their eyes, and then I put a small pipe cleaner in each child's hands. I asked the children to describe what they felt, rather than what the pipe cleaner was like. One example of their poetry:

PIPECLEANER

It feels warm and fuzzy.
The ends are prickly
It tastes horrible
It feels nice and it is blue.

We talked about emotions. Lonely feelings seemed to occur, they said, when their friends weren't around, and almost everyone had this polarity of "with friends" or "sad". Therefore, the next day, sitting on the floor, we experienced the "feeling of lonliness". The children were instructed to tighten up then relax their bodies, and then to explore with fingers only their immediate environment. Talking with the children later they seemed to feel that when they were alone next time, they would have a choice about how they would feel and could probably get more excited about things and less concerned about being lonely.

Examples of their poetry about their emotions:

FEAR

I stand frozen and shudder
then run. The dark closes in
the sky moves down. I look
for something–my dog–
any dog–any animal–
people scare me

ANGER

Red
things turning black and blue
tingly
teeth gritting

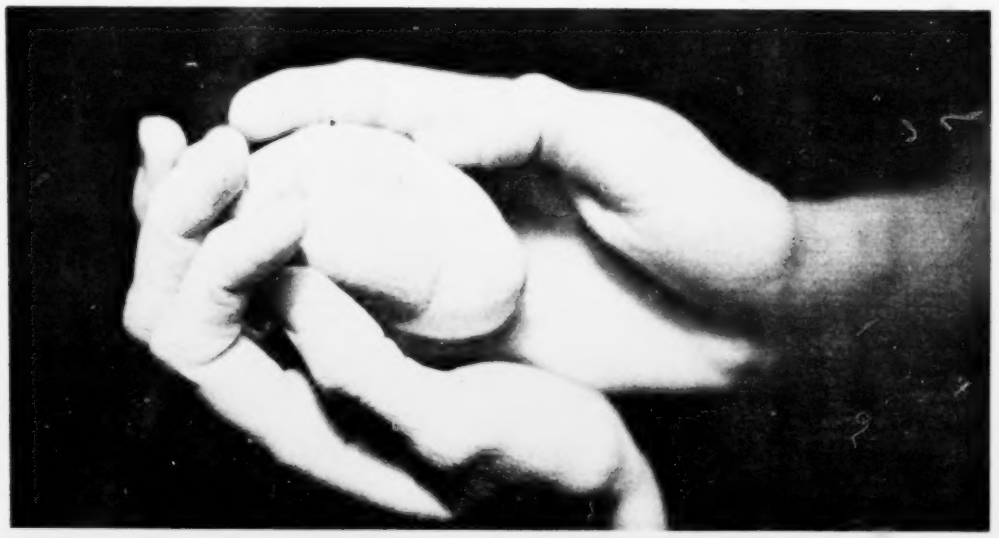
LONELY

Sometimes on cold mornings
Snow–frost–cold
I am lonely.

The class then went out into the playground to become aware of things they usually ignored. It was interesting to note that many of them picked up such items as rocks and, without looking at them, put them in their pockets.

When we got back into the room, the children found remote places in the room where they could be alone with their rocks. That old hunk of rock was found to have bumps and holes, ridges and different colors, a texture you could feel but couldn't see, a sense of hardness when you squeezed it, a special

taste, a cold temperature, a specific weight, round and sharp corners. In an evaluation at the end of my three week period with the class, the kids related this experience as the most interesting. Their natural ability to explore and discover through the senses was a fantastic learning experience for them.



The next day I held up the rock that we had explored the day before, and we discussed some of our discoveries. I then held up a dictionary, and asked what it was. Among the comments: "That's the old book you look up words in when you don't know their meaning." I suggested that there might be as much to discover in the dictionary as in the rock, if they took a new way of looking at the dictionary. Everyone got a dictionary and found a remote place in the room to sit and examine it. They felt the thickness of the pages, the texture of the cover, the smell of the paper, and tried to feel the ink words on the paper. The children then read about words they were interested in, and for one-half hour everyone poured through the dictionary and became highly interested and involved.

I don't want the children I teach to have a golden carrot before them to forever scramble after. I read some of their fiction stories, and they seemed to be continually identifying with great and fantastic people and events. Their attitude was generally not one of satisfaction or happiness about their present situation, but rather "Aw, just one more," "I wish I was bigger" or "Johnny doesn't have to."

One goal in education should be happiness for the child. He should be able to accept his situation, become involved and aware, and work towards improvement. Happiness through awareness and motivation is a prerequisite to self-fulfillment. For example, I gave every child in the room a grape. When I asked how many wished they had a whole bunch of grapes, they all put up their hands. I proposed to them that they only had one grape, and when eating it they probably wouldn't taste it because they would be thinking of the others they wished they had. I asked them to become aware of the one grape, touch it, smell it, see its shape and its color, feel its texture, imagine its taste. For five minutes the children became aware of their grapes, then in their mouths they concentrated on the burst of taste with their first bite. Their comment – Wowww!

Another day I worked for fifteen minutes in an attempt to improve concentration. I asked the children to feel their desks–the support and solidness of the desks. They then took out pens and papers and felt those. I asked them to write

their names on the top of the paper, and become aware of creating each letter to complete a word that represented themselves. I asked them all to close their eyes and concentrate on feeling and seeing the word I called out. The second time I said the word they were to communicate it back to me by writing it down on the paper. Their regular teacher told me afterwards that never before that year had so many in the class spelled so many words correctly as in that specific lesson.

One day I told the children that I had found something fantastic, and had it here in a box to show them. I told them not to let anyone else know what they saw, but as soon as they had looked they were to write a poem telling me as much about this fantastic thing as they could. Each child was amazed to find that the fantastic thing in the box was himself, as there was a mirror in the bottom of the box!

As I looked in I saw me in the box. I never knev
I looked so funny when I was surprised.

A little girl I see in the mirror
The little girl is shedding a tear
The little girl is full of fear
Afraid of her brand new career.

I saw a thing with two brown eyes,
A nose, a mouth and some teeth,
It had a smile on its face.
It looked just like a person I know?

During another lesson I asked them to relate the things that really bore them, and then suggest some ways of dealing with situations so as not to become bored. Anything repetitious and mechanical without meaning, in the school situation, especially if not related to the student's interest area, was deemed boring. The kids' reactions to boredom could be classified as escape mechanisms and appeared to consist of focusing on other ideas or selecting specific parts of the boring thing to turn into a game. I suggested some other ways of dealing with boredom.

I am a young teacher who can still remember what I went through in the school system. It wasn't a positive educational experience. Now going back into the schools after five years of university I see some progress towards providing a better educational experience for the children. My approach might be deemed radical, unconventional, different, and even, as it has been described by one principal—immoral. Call it what you will but look at its merits and its shortcomings. The children did:

Everything was different and most meaningful to me, but the most meaningful thing we ever had taken was about the dictionaries and the rock, I've never realized anything like a dictionary could be so meaningful.

I did not like the rock part. I did like the poetry alot. Everything was different and just nice.

I can remember everything, almost, and I won't forget it.

I remember when we went outside, when we felt things, when we wrote poems, and when we just talked about awareness. ●

Teachers interested in further exploring this approach should refer to: Gunther, Bernard. Sense Relaxation—Below Your Mind. *Collier Books, 1968.*